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AUTHOR’S PROOF

## Introduction

The use of visual research methods is becoming increasingly popular (Butler-Kisber, 2010) and over the last twenty years a particular interest has developed in eliciting children’s own perceptions on their lived experiences (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011). Given these research directions, it is notable that within many cultures and contexts it is recognised that drawings can provide valuable insights into children’s experiences, ideas, and feelings. Indeed, children’s drawings have long interested psychologists, artists, and educators; much has been published on this topic and the literature continues to grow. However, researchers have their own agendas and these agendas may not always have children’s needs and interests at their heart. I argue that, although children should be recognised as expert informers and witnesses regarding their own experiences and perspectives (Wood, 2005), the “use” of children drawings in research can, at times, be restrictive and tokenistic. Within this chapter I will describe and critique the various ways that children’s drawings can be collected and examined in research, with a particular emphasis on related ethical considerations. The overall theme of this section of the book is “beyond ethics”, so I will move beyond conventional understandings of ethics, such as informed consent, anonymity, right to withdraw, and so on, instead focusing on deeper and more complex concerns.

It is essential to highlight the distinction between research on children and research with children (Harcourt, 2011; Mayall, 2000). For example, most developmental studies looking at children’s drawings tend to concentrate on measurements and generalisations rather than seeking individual perspectives. In such studies children are often seen as subjects, rather than participants; findings are commonly presented as statistics, and children’s drawings are rarely shown. The drawings are often analysed in isolation from the child and the child’s contribution to the research ends once the drawing is completed. Although I understand the theoretical stance of researchers working in those ways, such approaches conflict against my positioning as an interpretive/critical-constructionist researcher.

Hope (2008) uses the metaphors of *journey* and *container* in describing drawing as a process and a product. I will further explain and expand upon these metaphors within this chapter. In my view, too much research focuses on drawings only as containers. Additionally, these containers are frequently narrowed by adults’ motives, limiting children’s voices and creativity. To counter balance this, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of the journeys both towards and stemming from the drawings – i.e., context, process, and

personal significance. I argue that the ethically aware researcher is not only concerned with exploring these journeys, but also seeks to make time and space to join the child as a fellow traveller in co-constructing inter-subjective meanings, with the child clearly positioned as navigator. By employing such an approach, children's drawings can be "used" in research in a positive, respectful, and empowering manner.

Mitchell *et al.* (2011, p. 43) note the importance of researchers "drawing" themselves into the research by explaining their interest in the area of drawing. My personal interest in researching children's drawings stems from my experience as an early years teacher. I noticed that whereas some children exhibited high motivation for making drawings their motivation for reading and writing was considerably lower. There was also a mismatch between the value I placed on their drawings and the focus of formal assessments driven by the expectations of the (then current) English National Curriculum (DfEE/QCA, 1999), which did not fully acknowledge drawing as a form of communication. I therefore sought to explore the communicative potential of young children's drawings in my own research (Hall, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2013), which I will refer to in the discussion below.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, drawing is seen as a symbolic tool and a powerful means of communication. My work builds on research using socio-cultural theory to investigate the influence of context on young children's drawing, meaning making, and representation at home and in school. These researchers include: Anning and Ring (2004) in England, Brooks (2002; 2004; 2005) in Canada, and Dockett and Perry (2005) in Australia. In my 2010 project, the three main research questions concerned what and how the children communicated through drawing, as well as drawing influences. I constructed case studies of 14 children aged between four and six at a rural school in South West England. Data collection took place over one school year, in three seven-week research phases. Spontaneous drawings from home and school were collated in scrapbooks and discussed with the children. The class teacher and the children's parents were interviewed and observations of the children drawing in class were also conducted. These methods were repeated for each phase and nearly 800 drawings were analysed through a data-driven, iterative process where intersubjective understandings were emphasised. This large data set affords detailed material with which to illuminate some of the issues discussed within this chapter. However, I must stress that I will only be able to offer brief insights here and contextual information will be minimal. Please note that more detailed discussion of my findings can be found elsewhere (e.g., Hall, 2013; Hall, 2010b; Wood & Hall, 2011).

The remainder of the chapter will be divided into three sections, each including a case study from my own research. I have chosen to use individual children as case studies and make reference to a range of their drawings. Section 1 will focus on the value of drawings in research, from various theoretical standpoints; Section 2 discusses drawings and power structures, with particular attention given to power in terms of children's meaning-making; and Section 3 looks at embarking on shared journeys, suggesting that children's drawings

are best understood through meaningful conversations with children. In conclusion, a summary and some final thoughts will be presented.

### **Aims for the chapter:**

- To provide a critical overview of research into children's drawings, both in terms of approaches to data collection and data analysis.
- To suggest some methodological and ethical guidance for research into children's drawings, ensuring children are positioned as powerful meaning-makers.

### **Section 1: The value of drawings in research**

Since the late 19th century much has been published on the topic of children's drawings and the literature continues to grow. One possible explanation for this far reaching and enduring interest is that drawing is commonly an enjoyable and playful activity for children, which can allow them to "recall previous experiences and knowledge, develop new ideas, produce strategies, and solve problems, as well as reflect on their mental activity" (Papandreou, 2014, p. 97). Additionally, despite the plethora of research, children's drawings cannot be easily explained by one unifying theory (Cox, 2005; Willats, 2005). Understandably, children's drawings offer a constant source of fascination to researchers.

Children's drawings may be the sole focus of the researcher's attention, or, alternatively, drawings might be used as a "child-friendly" form of data collection to fulfil other aims. However, it is insufficient to naïvely choose drawing as a child-friendly research method without considering related ethical implications (Mitchell, 2006). Firstly there is the matter of the research focus and whether this is likely to be something that children will find worthwhile or appealing. For example, Roberts (2000, p. 238) cautions that: "Childhood is not simply a preparation for adult life, and we cannot assume that those issues we as researchers, or practitioners, or policy-makers find gripping will hold quite the same interest for children and young people". Secondly, there is the matter of the research design, which can be seen to include both data collection and data analysis. Mitchell (2006, p. 62), in presenting a critique of the use of children's drawings in anthropological research, suggests that "Asking children to draw or to take pictures need not involve the kind of sustained presence of, or interaction with, an adult researcher that characterizes conventional methods of participant observation". It is interesting that the adult not having to interact with children is regarded as a potential benefit of using drawings as data collection from this anthropological perspective. This underlines the difference between researchers' professional interests, which can vary enormously. For example, whereas psychologists generally seek to better understand child development, artists/aestheticians usually want to discover more about artistic development (Leeds, 1989).

Regarding drawing as the sole focus of research, existing studies fall into two categories: commissioned drawings and non-commissioned drawings. Studies using commissioned drawings generally tend to take a developmental approach and studies using non-commissioned drawings are more likely to be interpretive in nature. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed summary of the many research studies that have involved children's drawings. However, there are general similarities which lead me to the following critical overview. Most developmental studies looking at children's drawings tend to concentrate on measurements and generalisations rather than seeking individual perspectives. In such studies children are often seen as subjects, rather than participants; findings are commonly presented as statistics, and children's drawings are rarely shown. The drawings are often analysed in isolation from the child and the child's contribution to the research ends once the drawing is completed. In contrast, interpretive studies looking at children's drawings are more likely to take into account the significance of the context in which the drawings (usually more than one) were produced. "Rich description" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 10) is achieved though using multiple data sources, which include the active gathering of individual children's perspectives. Finally, attention is also more likely to be given to the wider applications of drawing in learning and teaching.

Meaning is only achieved through interpretation and this presents an issue for researchers, as children's drawings can easily be misunderstood by adults (Arnheim, 1974; Paine, 1992). It is a frequently cited cliché that "a picture speaks a thousand words" and, undoubtedly, many people would agree with this. However, the danger of adopting this belief is that it can be highly misleading. Let us consider the following proposition:

The meaning of a picture or sculpture...is not simply something that it contains, like the contents of a suitcase. Meaning is made, actively created, in every encounter between individual human being and particular work of art. The depth and richness of that meaning will depend on the quality of that encounter, and that in turn will depend not just on the qualities of the work of art being looked at, but also on the qualities of the person looking at it... (Graham-Dixon, 2008, p. 6)

Graham-Dixon is referring to the viewing of an artwork, but the same considerations apply to the use of any type of image in research. Our interaction with images is never neutral. The viewer of an image brings all of his or her own experiences, interests, and prejudices to any interpretation, which in a research context can be problematic. Although the positivist researcher believes in a universal reality (i.e., you see what I see) the interpretivist researcher believes in multiple realities (i.e., you and I see differently). If the reality of the viewer does not match the reality of the creator then it is unlikely a common interpretation will be shared, despite some possible similarities. On one hand, it can be argued that certain objective facts may be stated about the *form* of an image, such as its size, colour, composition etc. I could make the observation that "There is a small blue circle in the

centre of this drawing''. On the other hand, the *meaning* of the image may be ambiguous, unless I am aware of the maker's intentions and the possible significance of the small blue circle. A circle, small and blue or otherwise, can be absolutely anything.

Having stated that an objective statement can be made about an image, many researchers argue that making a logical, objective assessment of a drawing is virtually impossible (Arnheim, 1974; Brittain, 1979; Matthews, 1999; Paine, 1992). This is because our understanding of children's drawings would be extremely limited if we were only to look at form and not meaning. Magritte's painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe) is an excellent example of the difference between art and reality. This Surrealist painting is commonly cited in an attempt to dispel the misconception that a picture of a thing is the same as the thing itself. Further, Trautner and Millbrath (2008, p. 4) explain:

It would be naïve to assume that children's drawings are a direct reflection of how they understand reality or of their mental representation of reality. On the contrary, most researchers today assume that the mental representation of an object drawn and the manner in which an object is drawn are rather independent of each other.

In the case of the drawings of young children, there is often a complexity and richness underneath their apparent simplicity (Coates & Coates, 2006; Eng, 1931/1999; Goodnow, 1977; Paine, 1981). Indeed, despite the popular belief that "children draw what they know, not what they see" (Costall, 2001, p. xiii), it is well-documented that children do not always draw everything that they know. Notably, young children often employ an economy of form in making their drawings, choosing to include only those features which they deem necessary (Arnheim, 1974; Golomb, 1992). As children grow older their representations become more differentiated and bear more resemblance to "the outside world" (Wilson, 1976, p. 17), but even an older child may choose not to use perspective in a drawing, because s/he may feel no need for it. These points are of particular importance when researchers are making judgements based on the level of detail and visual accuracy of a drawing. Unless the researcher has provided clear instructions and requested a detailed/visually accurate drawing, the child may produce something that looks sparse and this may be judged unfairly. Matthews (1997, p. 30) describes the "popular story" of children's drawing development as a journey from the "meaningless" to the "meaningful", and argues heavily against this. It is notable that complex thought processes are required in the making of even apparently simple representational drawings (Freeman, 1976). Additionally, Pariser (1995) presents a detailed case against placing visual realism as the pinnacle of artistic achievement, arguing that this is a narrow view which does not necessarily indicate higher cognitive skills. As Atkinson (1991, p.145) states: "if we base our assessment of children's drawing within irrelevant paradigms of representation and particular models of development, we are likely to miss the functioning significance the drawing has for the child". It is vital to recognise that young children have many

motivations for drawing for different purposes and in different contexts (Matthews 1997b, 1999, 2003). Notably, it is usually only interpretive studies which take the significance of context into account, whereas in most psychological studies drawings are analysed in a socio-cultural vacuum, thus narrowing potential interpretations (Anning, 2003). I argue that the ethically aware researcher is always concerned with foregrounding children's personal meanings, which was the prime concern in my own research.

#### *Case study A*

In my research, the content and meaning of the drawings ranged from quite simple to highly complex. In terms of content, a drawing could contain one just one feature or many different things. Also, the children's explanations could be straightforward (i.e., a few words) or detailed (i.e., a long narrative). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was not always the case that the apparently simple drawings had the simplest meanings. Intriguingly, I discovered that drawings cannot merely be understood as pictures on paper, as the children sometimes referred to invisible elements or a person or object outside of the drawing's boundary.



Figure 1 (Kiki, 5.8 years)

For my first case study I will discuss the drawings of Kiki. Kiki was 5 years, 8 months at the start of the study. She was a triplet, and her brother, Ben, and her sister, Mary, were also participants in the study. According to her mother, Kiki's interests were: playing knights, riding horses, cycling, camping, making friends, playing with her sister/brother/friends, eating chocolate and cakes, and parties. In total, 60 drawings were collected from Kiki across all three phases and she had drawings featuring a large range of subjects.

Given the vast range of content that the children could have drawn, what they chose to draw was indicative of their agency as drawers. In the autumn term, Kiki had a range of drawings featuring family members and fantasy characters and some of her drawings were

based on similar themes to those used by her brother (Ben) and sister (Mary). This shows the influence of siblings and the home context. However, Kiki always had her own intentions for her drawings and she used a recognisably exuberant style which differed greatly from her siblings; particularly the precise style favoured by Ben.

One could dismiss Kiki's drawing (Figure 1) as a bit of a scribble or say that she was just having fun with the crayons and pens. Undoubtedly, if a researcher was looking for competence in figure drawing, this example would not score well. Additionally, attention to detail did not appear to be Kiki's concern here, but this does not mean that she might not be able to make a more realistic drawing if she wanted to or was asked to. It is notable that this particular drawing was made near to Bonfire Night and it was certainly influenced by this cultural event. It is notable that a figure is visible underneath the layers of colour. During our research conversation I told Kiki that I could see her, but she was unhappy about this observation and quickly corrected me by saying: "No. I'm hiding behind the fireworks!" This is thus an example of a playful drawing, where Kiki has made use of the "discovery of the invisible" in "covering a drawing or mark in order to hide it or make it disappear" Matthews (1997, p. 67). Throughout the wider study, Kiki's drawings often had a magical theme, so it could be argued that this drawing reflects her interest in magic, as much as perhaps being influenced by Bonfire Night and her enjoyment in using the drawing media. Without her explanation I would have known the meaning of the drawing, and in correcting me she was exerting her agency as the drawing's maker and sharing her creative intention.

## **Section 2: Drawings and power structures**

In an ethical sense, power is an essential aspect of any research study (Christensen, 2004) and power in research relationships has received substantial attention in the wider field. The ethically aware researcher constantly strives to redress the balance between the researcher and the researched, in order to achieve positive, mutually beneficial outcomes. However, this aim is not achieved without genuine commitment and reflexivity. For example, Mortari and Harcourt (2012, p. 241) suggest that an "emotional investment" is needed on the part of the researcher in order to build a caring ethical relationship; this is particularly important in research with children, as children are potentially vulnerable to deception and manipulation when participating in research (Coady, 2006). Children are typically positioned as less powerful than adults, so adults engaged in research into children's lives need to think carefully about how they "present and perform themselves" (Christensen, 2004, p. 174) from both social and professional angles.

Of particular importance to research involving child participants is the researcher's duty of care. In connection to this, the ethical guidelines of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC] (2013) include advice in the following areas: responding to disclosures of abuse; voluntary participation based on valid informed consent; and

avoidance of personal and social harm to participants and researchers. The first of these has the most bearing on the current discussion, as children's drawings may reveal their previously un-voiced worries and in extreme cases the drawings may make reference to physical or mental abuse (Mak, 2011; Malchiodi, 1998). It is therefore the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that serious concerns are communicated to appropriate parties, such as the research gatekeeper. However, a note of caution is required as it is easy to make erroneous assumptions about the meaning of children's drawings, particularly in connection to emotion (Malchiodi, 1998). What may seem to be an "inappropriate" image may be innocent or inconsequential; hence the need to verify the personal meaning of the drawing to the child and be sensitive to patterns in subject-matter over time. Crucially, only those qualified to make professional judgements about child abuse should do so.

As previously stressed, there is a distinction between research *on* children and research *with* children (Harcourt, 2011; Mayall, 2000). It is a positive development that in more recent times the latter is becoming a more popular approach amongst researchers who are dedicated to listening to children's voices. Although drawing can be seen as an inclusive form of data collection (Johnson, 2008), much depends on the researcher's theoretical positioning, as this informs his/her ethical stance. For example, Mayall (2000, p. 121) observes:

In the traditional psychological paradigm, research is on children; it aims to study their development and they are to be observed, measured and judged. The second approach proposes working with children, in the sense that the adult tries to enter the children's worlds of understanding, and her own understanding and thereby her agendas may be modified through the research experience...

I am not suggesting that psychological research is unethical, but it needs to be highlighted that not all research using children's drawings has the interests and needs of the child at heart (Mitchell, 2006). As an interpretive researcher, I ensured that the children in my research were individually positioned as "co-constructors of knowledge, identity, and culture" (Janzen, 2008, p. 291). I did not wish to impose my interpretations onto them.

I have already emphasised the importance of researchers recognising the personal meaning of children's drawings. However, MacNaughton (2004, p. 46) argues that "meanings are distorted, limited and silenced by the conditions in which meaning-making takes place". This issue relates not only to the researcher's theoretical positioning, or presentation and performance (Christensen, 2004) but also to a host of other factors. It is therefore essential that researchers give critical attention to the socio-cultural conditions in which children's drawings are made and also consider these influences during analysis. MacNaughton (2004, p. 47) suggests that four conditions of power impact on children's meaning-making, which are briefly discussed below.



### *Condition 1: the power of pre-existing cultural imagery and cultural meanings*

From a post-structural view, cultural imagery and cultural practices reinforce existing cultural meanings; this is because “we cannot be or think ‘outside’ of our culture” (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 47). The influence of contemporary cultural imagery in the lives of young children is evident in their drawings of popular characters from film and television (e.g., Anning & Ring, 2004; Coates and Coates, 2006; Matthews, 2003). However, although we live in an increasingly visual world, much familiar subject-matter in children’s drawings can be seen to span centuries (McNiff, 1982), suggesting that it is not necessarily the most recent/popular cultural imagery that is the most powerful.

### *Condition 2: the power of expectations*

The power of expectations is connected to social structures. MacNaughton (2004, p. 48) posits: “gender, ‘race’, class and ability prescribe and limit the possibilities for each of us from birth. Those of us who delimit our possibilities do so only by challenging the expectations of the structures into which we were born”. Gender is perhaps the most influential social structure on children’s drawings and Morrow (2006, p. 100) suggests that children “actively construct and reconstruct gendered identities” in response to various “constraints and norms” within different socio-cultural contexts. For example, children often approach drawing in different ways depending on whether they are a boy or a girl. It is widely noted that the social aspect of drawing together appeals more to girls than boys (Anning & Ring, 2004) and the subject-matter of children’s drawings is also often highly gendered (e.g., Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey & Flichtbeil, 2006; McNiff, 1982; Ring, 2003, 2005),

### *Condition 3: the power of positions*

This condition ties in with the research relationships discussed above. MacNaughton (2004, p.51) argues that children share meanings with us that we want to hear: “Children construct meanings in situations in which power relations have already been accomplished and in which competing meanings vie for power”. It is notable, however, that different social contexts present different possibilities for children’s actions and self-perceptions (Mayall, 1994; Morrow, 2006). Additionally, positioning theory does not have the same limitations as role theory, where the understanding of identity is restricted to definitions on the basis of pre-defined roles, such as sister, brother, daughter, son etc. (Edmiston, 2008).

### *Condition 4: the power of the marketplace*

MacNaughton (2004, p. 53) tells us that “Children construct meanings within an increasingly globalised and commodified world in which increasingly narrow cultural meanings are being articulated and circulated”. I have already briefly mentioned some of the influences of popular culture on children’s drawings, but for the purposes of my argument it is useful to highlight the role of individual “actualisation”, as explained by Finnegan (2002, p. 20):

In their communicating humans often draw, indeed, on a rich source of (relatively) shared resources in particular cultures or situations. But seeing these as systems of independently existing signs is to miss the creative process in which they are actualised by specific human beings in particular contexts.

Finnegan's statement can be connected back to my earlier discussion on interpretation, as this actualisation can occur in both making drawings and making sense of drawings.

### *Case Study B*

In my study, the children positioned themselves as powerful in a various ways. Importantly, drawing enabled them to communicate their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) in both making drawings and in discussing them. Although their drawings were clearly influenced by the conditions of power discussed above, instead of producing direct copies of images, it was more common that the children took inspiration from these images and made their own meanings through reinterpretation/re-construction/re-imagination/transformation (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Cox, 2005; Ring, 2006). There were no instances of direct copying from commercial images, which is unusual when compared to the findings of other researchers (e.g., Anning & Ring, 2004; Coates & Coates, 2006).

For my second case study I will discuss the drawings of Elizabeth, who was 5 years, 9 months at the start of the study. She had two older brothers, Lucas (13) and Harry (15). According to her mother, Elizabeth's interests were: writing, playing make believe, playing in the garden, and having friends for tea. However, she also commented that "whenever you look for Elizabeth she's drawing!" In total, 171 drawings were collected from Elizabeth across all three phases and the subject-matter of her drawings varied widely.

Elizabeth's drawings in the spring term reflected a strong interest in animals. Although animals are noted as a common feature of girls' drawings (e.g., Boyatzis & Albertini, 2000; Boyatzis & Eades, 1999; Gardner, 1980; Wilson & Wilson, 1981), Elizabeth's animal drawings could certainly not be described as girly or cute. Instead, drawing offered her "a powerful way of making sense of the world" (Anning, 1997, p. 227) and, as a highly competent drawer, she explored a range of sophisticated animal-related issues through her drawings. For example, some of her drawings were about the complex relationships between wild animals and the potential dangers associated with their lives, including injury and death. In describing the interactions between the animals in her drawings she demonstrated her understanding of predators and prey, even though she did not use these words. Her drawings also helped her to communicate her personal empathy for the animals.

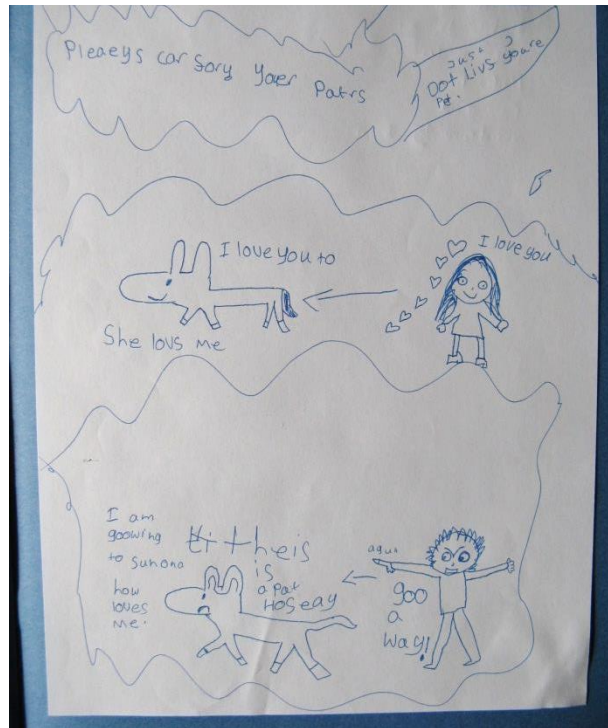


Figure 2 (Elizabeth, 6.3 years)

In the summer term Elizabeth's interest in the welfare of animals continued and, according to her mother, one of her drawings (Figure 2) was influenced by a television programme they had watched about the RSPCA. This drawing is presented in the form of a poster about caring for horses. There is a strong narrative evident, aided by the use of text to communicate the message that abused pets deserve loving homes. The power of positions is particularly evident in connection with this drawing, as the Elizabeth was not only sharing her knowledge and understanding about animals, but was also demonstrating her concern about the powerlessness of animals in relation to humans. For example, it is notable that un-caring owner is pointing a gun at the horse. This shows that children do not just play at roles, but also explore ideas and feelings about being and acting more powerfully and more competently (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

### Section 3: Embarking on shared journeys

In this section I will share some more observations on the value, and related challenges, of talking to children about their drawings. Listening to children's voices is not a straightforward task (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000), but it is essential to engage children in conversation about their drawings, because drawing and verbal language are inextricably linked (Mitchell *et al.*, 2006).

Adams (2005, 2006) describes four functions of drawing. *Drawing as perception* assists the ordering of sensations, feelings, ideas and thoughts; *drawing as communication* assists the

process of making ideas, thoughts and feelings available to others; *drawing as invention* assists the creative manipulation and development of thought; and *drawing as action* helps put ideas into action. For me, these functions are useful in explaining the various types of drawing that are possible in different contexts for different purposes. However, I see communication as the overarching function of drawing, and I agree with those who define drawing as a visual language (e.g., Brooks, 2005a; Golomb, 1992; Read, 1943; Vygotsky, 1978). I have previously proposed three dimensions of communication (Hall, 2010a), which I will briefly outline. Firstly, in the subjective dimension children express personal knowledge and meaning about their social and cultural worlds, placing drawing within a wider framework of multi-modal representation (Kress, 2000). Secondly, in the intersubjective dimension meaning can be co-constructed around the drawing and shared across members of the community (Jordan, 2004). In the third dimension communication in the drawing and about the drawing may have meta-communicative and meta-cognitive elements (Matthews, 2003). My research (Hall, 2010a) foregrounded meanings attached to the drawings in discussion; these meanings are essentially intersubjective and according to Wells (1987, p. 35), “intersubjectivity is the essential foundation of any communication.” Therefore, although I aimed to consider all three dimensions, specific reference was made to intersubjective understandings about children’s meanings and intentions.

In my research I used a naturalistic, open-ended approach to my research conversations with the children and I aimed to create a safe, listening space. “By facilitating and holding a safe, listening space, the researcher enables the participant(s) to story, narrate or dialogue with the image(s), thus allowing layers of meanings and significance to emerge” (Leitch, 2008, p. 54). The drawings acted as very useful springboards for discussion.

As mentioned in the introduction, Hope (2008) uses the metaphors of *journey* and *container* in describing drawing as a process and a product. She also explains how drawings can change as they are made:

When we use drawing as a tool for thought, we take our thoughts, along with our pencil, on a journey and produce ‘a drawing’ which is the a container for those ideas...I believe that in practice people begin to make a drawing that contains their initial ideas and then they move off on a thought journey as they draw, changing and developing interactively as ideas develop... (Hope, 2008, p. 7).

I find these metaphors especially useful because they not only highlight the complexity of thought processes involved in drawing, but they can also be connected to how different researchers approach any investigation involving children’s drawing. I have already noted how researchers’ interests and motivations influence their approach and also their ethical position. In my view, it is unfortunate that much research focuses on drawings only as containers, i.e., only looking at drawings as products. Additionally, these containers are frequently narrowed by adults’ motives, limiting children’s voices and creativity. For

example, I have described how many developmental studies tend to concentrate on measurements and generalisations rather than seeking individual perspectives. From this standpoint, communication is seen as transmission, with the meaning being held in the drawing itself. To counter balance this, and to acknowledge the child as autonomous, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of the journeys both towards and stemming from the drawings – i.e., context, process, and personal significance. To further explain, although Hope's use of the word "journey" refers to the making of the drawing I feel that this metaphor can very usefully be extended to encompass the narrative journey that can be taken in discussing the drawing as a product, i.e., using the drawing as a narrative springboard (Wright, 2007a&b).

Wright (2007a, p. 2) refers to the "graphic-narrative play" of children's drawings, which she suggest combines both non-verbal and verbal forms of communication. She explains that the non-verbal can be seen to include: "graphic depiction, stemming from imagery and visual-spatial-motor memory; bodily-kinesthetic communication through 'enaction' and expressive gesture" and the verbal: "story creation, expressive vocalization and the use of sound effects to accompany the artwork" (2007a, p.2). This understanding of children's communication through drawing underlines the importance of researchers considering how to best access the full extent of children's drawing intentions. Children not only use drawings to make sense of the world around them (Matthews, 2003) but also to create their own worlds and cultures (Thompson, 1999). Importantly, drawings allow children to inhabit their own imagined spaces made tangible by drawing (Brooks, 2005; Knight, 2009). Some researchers (e.g., Coates & Coates, 2006) argue that the richest insights are to be gained by observing children in the process of drawing rather than looking at drawings as products. However, I argue that the ethically aware researcher is not only concerned with exploring the journeys both towards and stemming from the drawings, but also seeks to make time and space to join the child as a fellow traveller in co-constructing inter-subjective meanings, with the child clearly positioned as navigator. By employing such an approach, children's drawings can be "used" in research in a positive, respectful, and empowering manner.

### *Case study C*

Researchers have identified various types of drawers. For example, Thompson (1999) discusses the *Subject Matter Specialist*, the *Diverse Drawer*, and the *Autobiographical Drawer*. Additionally, Gardner (1980) suggests that children tend to be either *Patterners* who are interested in observable regularities in their environment, or *Dramatists* who prefer to depict stories. However, based on the findings from my own research, I argue that children can exhibit characteristics of these different drawing types at different times; therefore such categorization is too narrow to be useful in understanding the full extent of what and how children communicate through drawing.

For my third and final case study, I will discuss the drawings of Red Dragon. Red Dragon was 4 years, 8 months at the start of the study. He had one older brother, Lawrence (15).

According to his mother, Red Dragon's interests were: playing in the garden, playing on the beach, drawing and writing, computers, playing with Duplo, Lego, and Brio railway, music and singing, and doing jigsaw puzzles. In total, 111 drawings were collected from Red Dragon across all three phases and, as with Kiki and Elizabeth, his drawings featured a large range of subject-matter.

Throughout all three phases, Red Dragon used drawing to position himself as an inventor and many of his drawings reflected a strong interest in technology. For example, in the autumn he made several drawings of road systems and one of these featured buttons which he explained had different functions, including playing music. Kendrick and McKay (2004) suggest that drawing allows children to explore sensory interests, which might not be so easily achievable through writing. Although it was quite common for the children to touch their drawings in explaining what they had drawn (for example, to point out a particular feature) Red Dragon was the only child who invited me to touch one of his drawings. This seemed to be prompted by his observations regarding the texture of the paper and an apparent desire to initiate communication with me. This direct engagement with the drawing was also evident in "a computer game" drawing, which took the form of a map, featuring various dangers, such as "poisonous snakes". In reference to the snakes, he told me that: "I can only touch them because they only like boys and girls, they, they don't like mums and dads". This is evidence of the power of positions, mentioned earlier.



Figure 3 (Red Dragon, 5.1 years)

Figure 3, completed in the spring term, shows a drawing with a magical theme. Red Dragon explained that this was a fountain that could make you "disappear", "go to a different country" and also take you "back in time". This drawing is an example of Red Dragon communicating his "playful intentions" (Cox, 2005, p. 121) through drawing, here in the form of dramatic story concepts. Although this drawing was made at home, at school the

children had been studying a fairytale topic, so this may have inspired some of his ideas. Brooks (2004, p. 49) comments that “one of the qualities of drawing is its generative and divergent possibilities.” Drawing allowed Red Dragon to make his own rules, thereby exhibiting power and autonomy. His fountain could have as many functions as he liked, as the drawing offered numerous playful narrative possibilities. This drawing can be seen as evidence of his graphic play “in worlds created and firmly bound by a sheet of paper” (Wilson & Wilson 1981, p. 50). However, I have already stated that the paper can offer a permeable boundary for children’s meaning-making. For example, it is notable that Red Dragon made some drawings where he referred to himself as an invisible entity and I would never have known this by just looking.

## **Conclusion**

It has not been my intention to provide a checklist to employ when conducting research into, or with, children’s drawings, but rather to demonstrate how the topic can be examined from a variety of angles. Drawing might commonly be seen as a child-friendly form of data collection, but ethical considerations abound (Mitchell, 2006) regardless of the researcher’s intentions and professional positioning. In addition to highlighting the value of drawings in research, I have problematized their use. Although drawing allows children to share their experiences, ideas, and feelings; importantly, “we must beware of the temptation to equate children’s drawings and paintings with the totality of what they know on any given subject” Lenz-Taguchi’s (2006, p. 276). Analysis and interpretation should be very carefully considered, ideally allowing the children to engage in dialogue about their creations in order to respect them as expert informers and witnesses regarding their own experiences and perspectives (Wood, 2005). I have discussed the power structures involved in researching children’s drawings, covering issues of power in both research relationships and meaning-making. It is an encouraging development that, in recent years, research *with* rather than *on* children (Harcourt, 2011; Mayall, 2000) is becoming a more popular approach amongst researchers who are dedicated to listening to children’s voices. MacNaughton (2004) emphasises that although children make their own meanings in and through cultural resources (such as drawing), these meanings are always determined by pre-existing discourses. However, in sharing some of the findings from my own research I have demonstrated how children are able to exercise their individual agency through reinterpretation/re-construction/re-imagination/transformation (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Cox, 2005; Ring, 2006). Lastly, I have suggested that embarking on shared journeys through co-constructing inter-subjective meanings with children about their drawings is a way of “using” children’s drawings in research in a positive, respectful, and empowering manner.

I hope that this chapter has offered some critical insights that may help to constructively inform future research.

**Questions for academic readers:**

1. Do you think it may sometimes be ethically appropriate to analyse children's drawings without discussion with the children who created the drawings?
2. Children's descriptions and explanations of their drawings can vary over time - does this present any ethical issues?
3. If you were to write some ethical guidelines to support researchers in using children's drawings in research, what points would you include?

**Questions for industry partners:**

1. I have talked about power structures in connection to meaning-making – how does this relate to your work?
2. Do children's drawings influence your work in any way?

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